



## Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

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September 21, 2005

U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives:

The U.S. House of Representatives will vote this week on the future of the Head Start program. We fully recognize the need for Congress in the reauthorization process to examine whether this longstanding and wide-reaching program to improve school readiness for our most vulnerable children is achieving its full potential, in the face of a changing population. To that end, we are writing to express our strong endorsement that the pending House legislation (H.R. 2123) calls for a study within the National Academies of Sciences to examine issues in early childhood assessment and educational outcomes that would be appropriate for Head Start programs. Further, we would like to specifically endorse an amendment that would temporarily suspend the current National Reporting System (NRS), until such time as these recommendations of the National Academies' panel can be developed. The potential applications of the NRS are so far-reaching, and the children so vulnerable, that the relevant areas of developmental science and practice should be *fully* brought to bear. It is particularly important that caution be exhibited in relating outcomes to the funding of programs, until such time as both the nature and process of assessments have been studied and validity has been well established.

Representing 6000 developmental scientists, we wish to underscore that program outcomes, as well as the process and tools of assessment for Head Start children, should: (1) reflect *normative* data on development in early childhood, (2) have established reliability and validity; (3) capture the complexity of individual differences in *developmental rate* during this period, (4) reflect the *interdependence* of cognitive and socioemotional development; and (3) account for *cultural and contextual* variables that will most certainly affect children's attainment. Briefly, the level of importance of the issues at hand, as well as the level of vulnerability of the children involved, dictate that broad and deep scientific expertise.

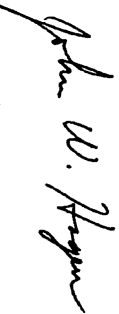
SRCD is a voluntary membership organization that was founded in 1933 by the National Research Council, the research arm of the National Academies. The two goals of founding SRCD were to advance interdisciplinary research in child development and to encourage the application of research findings for the betterment of children's lives. We genuinely applaud the thoughtful approach that is being taken by Congress in the process of reauthorizing the Head Start program. However, we would be negligent in the mission

of SRCD if we did not underscore the *critical* role of broad scientific expertise and consideration before you complete and vote on this legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Mary Ann McCabe".

Mary Ann McCabe, Ph.D.  
Director of Policy and Communications, SRCD

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John W. Hagen".

John W. Hagen, Ph.D.  
Executive Officer, SRCD



AMERICAN  
PSYCHOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

September 20, 2005

U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the 150,000 members and affiliates of the American Psychological Association (APA), I am writing regarding the implementation of the Head Start National Reporting System (NRS) on Child Outcomes, a standardized assessment tool administered to preschool children.

As you prepare for the consideration of the School Readiness Act of 2005 (H.R. 2123) on the House floor this week, we urge your support for an amendment to suspend the implementation of the NRS and adopt the legislation's call for the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to establish an independent panel of experts to review and offer recommendations to the Secretary of Health and Human Services for developing an appropriate national assessment system to inform Head Start program improvements.

Since its inception in 1965, Head Start has provided more than 22 million low-income preschoolers, including more than 900,000 children last year alone, with an array of high quality, comprehensive services to enhance their school readiness and well being. Along with its focus on pre-academic skills, Head Start offers a comprehensive social-emotional approach to school readiness, which includes mental health screening, nutritious meals, and medical and dental exams. Head Start has also helped parents to be more involved in their children's learning.

APA strongly supports your efforts to craft legislation that will serve to build upon the core values of this vital program for low-income American children. H.R. 2123 strengthens the program's academic components, accountability, and teacher quality, and works to improve collaboration between Head Start and other state and local programs. It also expands critically important funds for Early Head Start programs. However, APA remains concerned that the NRS continues to be administered to Head Start children despite concerns raised regarding its design and implementation.

In this regard, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report in May 2005 analyzing the Head Start National Reporting System. The findings pointed to concerns about the reliability and validity of some aspects of the assessment, including the Spanish version, and the limited scope for the reporting system (e.g., focus is not directed to key aspects of the Head Start program, such as physical health and development and social and emotional development).

Given these concerns raised about the appropriateness of early childhood assessment targeted to literacy, language and numeracy skills, APA supports the legislation's call for the NAS to establish an independent panel of experts to review and synthesize research and theory in the social, behavioral, and biological sciences regarding early childhood, and make recommendations regarding each of the following:

- a) Age- and developmentally-appropriate Head Start academic requirements and outcomes;
- b) Differences in the type, length, mix, and intensity of services that are necessary to ensure that all children enter kindergarten ready to succeed;
- c) Appropriate assessments of young children to improve instruction, services, and program quality;
- d) Identification of existing or needed scientifically-based, valid and reliable assessments that can measure child outcomes in the areas of critical importance to school readiness; and
- e) Appropriate use and application of valid and reliable assessments for Head Start programs.

It is critical that the forthcoming NAS recommendations be incorporated into the implementation of the National Reporting System on Child Outcomes to ensure utilization of valid, reliable, and high quality assessments that are culturally, linguistically, and developmentally appropriate for preschool-age children. In addition, professionals conducting the assessments of children should be adequately trained on how to perform these assessments.

We would welcome the inclusion of the American Psychological Association in the list of representatives to be appointed to the independent panel of experts, as our association has much research-based information to contribute in each of the areas noted above, both in general and specifically as applied to the Head Start program. In addition to our individual members who conduct research in early childhood development and assessment, our association includes such organizational structures as our Committee on Children, Youth, and Families and our Committee on Psychological Tests and Assessment.

We look forward to working with you to strengthen this vital piece of legislation that will continue to provide much-needed services to our nation's preschool children to prepare them for kindergarten and life-long learning. For further information, please contact Annie G. Toro, J.D., M.P.H., in the APA Public Policy Office at (202) 336-6068 or [atoro@apa.org](mailto:atoro@apa.org).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "H. Tomes".

Henry Tomes, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Public Interest Directorate

September 20, 2005

U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives:

This week, the U.S. House of Representatives will vote on the future of the Head Start program, the forty-year old comprehensive program for ensuring that our nation's poorest infants, toddlers and preschoolers have the right start on their early learning, health, and family stability. The program has been successful in preparing our nation's poorest children for school and for a better life, while helping their families engage in and support their children's positive development and learning. As a national model for preschool programs at the state and local levels, the initiatives undertaken in Head Start have a profound effect on millions of Head Start children, as well as children enrolled in other preschool programs throughout the nation.

As recognized experts in the field of child assessment and early education, we write to you specifically on one aspect of Head Start: the Head Start National Reporting System (NRS), a standardized test that is given to Head Start preschool children twice a year.

The legislation before you (H.R. 2123) wisely calls for a panel of independent experts under the National Academy of Sciences to review and provide guidance on appropriate outcomes and assessments for young children. Because of our concerns about the design and implementation of the Head Start National Reporting System, we urge you to adopt the amendment to be offered by Representative Ron Kind that would suspend the implementation of the Head Start National Reporting System until the recommendations for developing a national assessment system, as appropriate, to inform Head Start program improvements are proposed by the National Academy of Sciences panel.

We wish to be clear that we value appropriate assessment of young children to improve teaching, learning, and other services. We believe that evaluations of programs and accountability are critical to the continuous improvement of the services that children and families receive in Head Start and in other early learning programs. However, we believe that the Head Start National Reporting System has serious flaws in its design (particularly the Spanish version); in its implementation; and in its usefulness for Head Start programs.

The NRS is administered to every four and five year old English or Spanish-speaking child in Head Start twice a year, in addition to the currently required screening and ongoing assessment of children in the program. With the NRS, four and five year old children in Head Start are subjected to at least six test points in a single school year period. In addition, the NRS is very costly in a time of strained resources for programs. The additional costs include development and dissemination of materials; training of assessors; reporting of results; and the costs of time of teachers and children taken from instruction and other services.

A large body of research demonstrates that the assessment of young children is more complex and must be approached differently than assessment of older children.

Assessments must be matched to specific purposes; an assessment used for high-stakes purposes is often not suitable for improving instruction; and those intended to improve instruction may not be valid for program evaluation purposes. In its report of 2001, *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*, a panel of experts convened by the National Research Council cautioned that “[A]ll assessments, and particularly assessments for accountability, must be used carefully and appropriately if they are to resolve, and not create, educational problems. Assessment of young children poses greater challenges than people generally realize....”

The Government Accountability Office published its analysis of the Head Start National Reporting System on May 17, 2005. It concluded that:

Analysis of the NRS is currently incomplete to support its use for the purposes of accountability and targeting training and technical assistance. ... HSB has not articulated a strategy for how it will use information from the NRS to meet its purposes... Such decisions are important first steps in any test development.

...[the] agency has not shown the NRS itself to be valid and reliable over time... serious concerns whether the Spanish version of the NRS adequately measures the skills of Spanish-speaking children and whether results form the English and Spanish versions are comparable.”

The NRS also may not provide sufficient information to target training and technical assistance to the centers and classrooms that need it most.

Children in Head Start receive a developmental screening test upon entry to the program, are given diagnostic assessments as necessary, and are assessed by their teachers at least three times a year on *all* domains, including literacy, language, and math. In addition, each program is monitored periodically against multiple criteria. A longitudinal study, the Congressional mandated Impact study, using random assignment, is carefully evaluating the effects of Head Start. Thus, Head Start will continue to assess young children and to be closely monitored and evaluated during the suspension of the Head Start National Reporting System.

Given the body of research of appropriate child assessment and the GAO report, we urge you to suspend the implementation of the Head Start National Reporting System until the National Academy of Science panel recommendations become available.

Sincerely,

Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Psychology and Public Policy  
New York University

Kathleen McCartney, Ph.D.  
Acting Dean & Gerald S. Lesser Professor in Early Childhood Development  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

(continues on next page)

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